

Virtual Coronavirus Town Hall 5: Summary

March 26, 2020

U.S. Army Africa Commanding General Maj. Gen. Roger Cloutier, the senior responsible officer for the Vicenza and Livorno and Pisa U.S. military communities; U.S. Army Garrison-Italy Commander Col. Daniel J. Vogel; Col. Bryan Love, the 207th Military Intelligence Brigade commander; and Maj. Ezella Washington, the Clinical Services deputy commander, held a virtual town hall March 26 to update the military, civilian, contractor, local national and family community on the latest COVID-related information and to answer questions submitted to the garrison Facebook page ahead of and during the event.

Cloutier emphasized that the united focus for the U.S. Army community and our Italian hosts continues to be to do everything possible to stop COVID-19 from spreading.

“We are fighting an unusual enemy, but make no mistake, we are in an operation,” he said. “The most important thing you can do in this fight is stay healthy by changing your normal routine. Stay home, respect social distancing, wash your hands, and avoid other people.”

Vogel addressed the recently updated Italian restriction of movement policies, indicating that individuals are limited to traveling within their own municipalities and within 200 meters of their homes. All individuals should carry the required, up to date forms and official ID at all times, he said. He also recommended that individuals carry their passport, soggiorno and codice fiscale in addition to their SETAF driver’s license.

Love reported that the Soldier in isolation is improving and is expected to recover. He also indicated that the COVID-19 has had no impact on the brigade’s readiness and ability to conduct intelligence operations.

In her remarks, Washington stated that clinic providers are still available to see patients with acute and emergency needs. She also said that in order to keep patients safe, the health center has established an appointment-only acute respiratory clinic that will be open Monday through Friday from 8 AM to 11:20 AM. To protect high-risk patients, the health center is also establishing a drive through pharmacy beginning March 30.

Among the questions addressed during the town hall were:

- Can you define “mission essential?”

Cloutier and Vogel both indicated that in rapidly changing situations commanders continually reassess which personnel are mission essential according to both their unique mission and current mission demands. However, some personnel, those needed for sustainment of basic operations and leadership might always be considered essential. In any situation, Cloutier said, maintaining readiness is always essential.

- If minimal manning is in effect why are some from unit leadership telling people to carry on business as usual?

While the first two priorities are to protect the force and prevent the spread of COVID-19, the third is to maintain readiness, Cloutier said. Readiness is important because it is required to do our mission: defend the U.S. and its interests. Conducting physical training, qualifying on weapons systems and being able to perform military duties in an emergency are all elements of readiness. The rapidly deployable units in the Vicenza military community are required to remain rapidly deployable.

“Training must go on because we have an obligation to our country to be able to accomplish our mission,” he said.

- Will the Stop Movement order extend into May? How can we help planners to schedule out-processing? How does this affect retirements? What are the rules for flying in case of emergency leave? If I get a Red Cross message about a close relative's illness or death, will US citizens be authorized to travel?

Vogel acknowledged that the “stop movement” could be extended past May 11. Soldiers should continue to work the process as usual, going to S1. He said that as guidance becomes available, the garrison will proceed accordingly.

Retirements are exempt and are not affected by the policy.

The ETP Board permits movements for Red Cross messages, which are exempt from the restriction of movement, and will provide a GO letter to intercede with Italian authorities. There are flights currently scheduled from Venice to Rome and from Rome to JFK, but they are all subject to change. However, even travelers on emergency leave will be subject to a 14-day quarantine upon entry into the U.S. still must reckon with 14-day quarantine.

- Can you review the rules on testing for the virus? Should we test on base now or go to San Bortolo?

Washington said that COVID-19 testing is being conducted through the acute respiratory clinic. Individuals who have symptoms should make an appointment at the acute respiratory clinic. After an evaluation, if other illnesses are ruled out, the patient could be swab-tested for COVID-19. If that happens, further instructions will follow.

- Why do the Italians keep changing the self-declaration forms? Which one do we need to carry? Who can sign the emergency form? Do our Military IDs suffice for Emergency essential?

Vogel stated that the form was recently updated and the current form is on garrison site. Family members should always carry the self declaration form which indicate that travel is for a situation of necessity and certify that the person is not under quarantine and has not tested positive for the virus. Employees traveling for work also need to carry the work form indicating that their presence at the work site is considered essential.

- What are the current rules for births at San Bortolo? Are fathers allowed in the delivery room?

Washington indicated that while fathers have been allowed to be present in labor and delivery rooms in the past, the policy at San Bartolo changed March 25. Currently, only the person with the medical appointment or being treated is allowed entry into the hospital. Washington said that while this is understandably difficult and scary for some, the policy was enacted for each patient's safety.

- Should we all be wearing masks? Several townships are delivering masks to their residents. Should the base be giving us masks?

Washington answered that USAG follows World Health Organization and European Center for Disease Control guidance, indicating that people who are already ill or those in regular contact with ill people should wear masks, but healthy people should not. However, patients at San Bartolo are required to wear a mask. The patient liaison will provide masks upon meeting individuals with appointments.

- What is the gasoline situation in Italy? Will we be able to buy gas?

Vogel said that the fuel issue has been resolved and gasoline will be available.

- With the barbers closed are we relaxing grooming standards or do we need to find someone to cut our hair?

Cloutier said that while the barbers are closed, grooming standards will not be relaxed. If Soldiers are unable to find an alternate barber, they should seek assistance within their unit or chain of command to resolve the issue.

- Why isn't the Del Din and Ederle shuttle running?

Vogel answered that the shuttle runs on Thursdays. Units on Del Din are providing means for shuttling Soldiers to Ederle to take care of necessary errands. If any Soldiers are not able to obtain adequate transportation for their needs, they should notify their chain of command for guidance and help.

- Would it be possible for the commissary to start a curb side service? It employs the baggers and orders can be placed in advance.

Vogel said that although it is a great idea, the commissary doesn't currently have the capability to support that type of program.

Vogel closed the meeting by expressing pride in the community's resilience.

“We are dedicated to beating this enemy,” he said. “We are dedicated to providing for our community and ensuring the safety of every one of you. There’s been a great deal of sacrifice and I truly believe we’ll be stronger when we come out of this.”

Cloutier closed with reminders to abide by Italian COVID-19 guidance and to do our part to protect the force, stop the spread of COVID-19, and maintain readiness.

“We are in this together,” he said.